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AUTHOR Sanacore, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Reading aloud is an important motivational strategy not only for primary school children but also for upper-elementary, middle, and high school students. Teachers should pursue an instructional balance that considers both a sensitivity to curricular mandates and a perspective that reading aloud is beneficial to students. Poems, short stories, or excerpts from a longer selection can be selected by content area teachers who feel constrained by time limitations. In addition to fiction, students benefit from exposure to a wide variety of materials. An important aspect of reading aloud is to engage students interactively during the process. As students become more comfortable with the read-aloud experience, educators can use this meaningful context to extend students' vocabulary and concept development. The reading aloud experience can highlight the function of meaning for students who speak a nonstandard dialect of English, helping all students to accept varied forms of responding, and validating the belief that students who speak in nonstandard dialects are different, not deficient, in their language use. Students also need opportunities to read aloud to an audience. Although reading aloud is not a panacea, teachers and administrators must realize its enormous potential for nurturing the literacy development of all students, including a growing number of at-risk learners. (Ten helpful hints for reading aloud are attached.) (RS)

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Reading Aloud: A Neglected Strategy for Older Students

Joseph Sanacore

Department of Special Education and Reading
C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University
Brookville, New York 11548

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Jim Trelease, best-selling author of **The New Read-Aloud Handbook** (NY: Penguin, 1989), believes that learners from preschool to college benefit from the read-aloud experience. According to Trelease, this centuries-old practice is important for the same reasons we talk to learners: to inform or explain, to reassure, to entertain, to stimulate curiosity, and to inspire. Since these experiences support a positive attitude toward reading, they increase the chances of establishing a solid foundation for future literacy development. Specifically, they strengthen speaking, reading, and writing as they negate or lessen the impact of rising illiteracy.

Trelease also believes that reading aloud should occur in all classrooms because it arouses the imagination, nurtures emotional development, stretches the attention span, and establishes the reading-writing connection. These positive outcomes usually take place as students are exposed to a positive reading role model, a wider diversity of books than they would select on their own, rich vocabulary, good language/grammar, new information, and the pleasures of reading.

This exposure is especially important in the context of today's demographic trends and their relationship to the changing school culture. For example, the high divorce rate, the large number of single-parent households, and the increase of families with two working parents are only a few of the societal changes that have caused disruptions in students' lives. These disruptions range from homes with less structure to homes with elevated stress levels. Although parents often have the best

of intentions for their children, they simply lack the time, patience, and sustenance that are necessary for giving their children the continued support that they need and deserve. Reading aloud, by itself, will not eliminate recent demographic trends, but it can instill learners with a love of reading and thereby can create within them a desire to develop the lifetime literacy habit. Thus, complications in students' lives, caused by today's changing society, will not be exacerbated with an increased potential for future illiteracy or aliteracy.

Regrettably, reading aloud is not considered a major content area activity for older students. In the upper-elementary, middle, and high school levels, teachers and administrators feel the constraints of 45-minute instructional blocks of time and of state education department requirements concerning content to be covered during the school year. In addition, state competency testing mandates and local standardized assessments further dictate schools' teaching efforts. In response to these pressures, we must ask ourselves a basic question: Who is driving the curriculum? Although we do not want to be in violation of state and local requirements, we should pursue an instructional balance that considers both a sensitivity to such requirements and a perspective that reading aloud is beneficial to our students. Such a balance nurtures our students' overall growth; it also sends a message to everyone that reading aloud is not a frill but rather an important activity that supports our students' literacy development.

Considerations

If we believe in the efficacy of reading aloud, then we will find ways of carrying out this worthwhile activity. The following suggestions may be helpful:

- With time limitations for content area instruction, Regie Routman (**Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12**, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991) recommends that a poem, short story, or excerpt from a longer selection be used as a read-aloud or shared reading experience. This activity takes minimal time at the beginning of the instructional period and sets the tone for the rest of the period. Likewise, as part of reading mini-lessons, Nancie Atwell reads aloud a variety of short pieces of literature. In her classic work **In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents** (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987), she describes her experiences with eighth graders. For example, she selects pieces she and her students like, and they include Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory," selections from Robert Cormier's **Eight Stories**, Paul Gallico's "The Snow Goose," Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon," and Jack London's "To Build a Fire." Atwell and her students also enjoy stories by Margaret Atwood, F. Scott Fitzgerald, O. Henry, Shirley Jackson, Alice Munro, J.D. Salinger, John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and others. Atwell concludes that her students are enthralled by good read-alouds and that these activities motivate them to borrow the books that are shared, to locate

other books by the same authors, and to respond actively and personally with the texts.

- In addition to fiction, our students benefit from exposure to a wide variety of materials. According to Betty Carter and Richard Abrahamson (JR, May 1991), older adolescents enjoy listening to and reading nonfiction, especially if it triggers such emotional responses as anger, passion, sorrow, distress, and occasionally laughter. Among the nonfiction resources that teachers can read aloud are textbooks, biographies, autobiographies, diaries, magazines, and newspapers. This broad exposure not only increases the chances of accommodating our students' interests but also supports content area goals, themes, and standards. For example, if World War 11 is the focus of study, the teacher can read aloud parts of **Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl.** After piquing the listeners' emotions and motivating them to respond personally to the War, the teacher can share a recent article in a magazine or newspaper that provides an update or retrospective about the topic. Helpful sources include **American Heritage, American History Illustrated, Current Events, Life, The New York Times Magazine, Newsweek, Smithsonian Magazine** and **TIME.** Reading aloud a variety of materials demonstrates to our students that we care about their unique needs and wishes, even if they are reluctant readers or individuals with short attention spans. With patience, sensitivity, and foresight, we can modify the behavior of most problematic learners as we guide them to realize that content

area reading can be interesting, useful, and personally satisfying. These efforts also help to establish a foundation for lifelong learning, because carefully chosen materials we read aloud today are likely to be read by our students tomorrow.

- An important aspect of reading aloud is to engage our students interactively during the process. Although expertise with the process is unnecessary, we should at least like the material being presented and should be fairly certain that our students like it also. In addition, using intonational patterns--pitch, stress, and juncture--will further entice listeners to be attentive and to interact with the text. Other strategies include asking prediction questions before the read-aloud; pausing at appropriate times during the read-aloud, permitting listeners to reflect, to confirm or disconfirm their initial predictions, and to make other predictions; and asking inferential questions after the read-aloud so that our students can integrate their prior knowledge with story content. Thus, in preparing to read Jack London's "To Build a Fire," the teacher discusses the man and the dog as the most important characters in the story and indicates that the story takes place in the Yukon on a freezing day. Then, the teacher mentions the story title, shows story illustrations, and asks: "What do you think will happen in the story?" While reading aloud, the teacher gives opportunities for listeners to think about their predictions and to generate other predictions about what will happen to the man after falling through the ice and getting

his feet wet. Our students' predictions will probably range from the man will build a fire and dry his feet to the man will freeze to death. At the end of the story, the teacher poses inferential questions, such as: "Why did the man decide to travel on such a dangerously freezing day?" "How could he have prepared more thoroughly to prevent his tragic death?" "If you were the man, what would you have done differently before (or during) the trip?" This process helps listeners interact with the text, thereby supporting a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the story. The process also demonstrates to learners a variety of worthwhile strategies they can apply during reading. A caution, however, is not to overdo this approach, since it may stifle the natural flow of story structure and story language and may actually negate the motivational value of reading aloud.

- As our students become comfortable with the read-aloud experience, we can use this meaningful context to extend their vocabulary and concept development. The prereading plan (PReP), structured overview, semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis (SFA), and other strategies can be adapted effectively to reading aloud. In their book **Semantic Feature Analysis: Classroom Applications** (IRA, 1991), Susan Pittelman, Joan Heimlich, Roberta Berglund, and Michael French provide useful suggestions for helping learners organize content material. Specifically, the authors present SFA grids, which are efficient and effective ways of graphically representing important ideas

to be studied. In adapting this approach to a unit of study concerning European countries, the teacher can give students a grid that lists the countries being highlighted (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland); next to the countries are spaces representing such features as land (seacoast, has islands, has mountains), chief products (livestock, lumber, iron ore, fish), and government (monarchy, republic). As the teacher reads aloud fiction and nonfiction materials concerning the countries being studied, listeners fill in the spaces with a plus sign if the countries substantially possess the features, a minus sign if they do not, and a question mark if uncertainty exists. Afterward, class discussion further supports students' growing awareness of key vocabulary and concepts related to the countries and motivates students to continue using the grid as an independent study aid during reading. When our students are introduced to countries in other parts of Europe, they can extend the grid to reflect increased knowledge of the countries and the important features they represent. Although semantic feature analysis and other comparable strategies are effective for building and activating our students' prior knowledge, they should not be used excessively; otherwise, they may negatively impact on the read-aloud experience.

- Another issue concerning reading aloud is the growing number of students who speak a dialect of English. Interestingly, even standard English is a dialect of the English language, and if we accept this perspective, then all dialects should

have a comfortable place in our classrooms. More emphatically, we should embrace this type of diversity since it enriches our students' lives as it creates a deeper awareness of and tolerance for different cultures. Reading aloud fits well in this context because it provides opportunities for listening to standard English while it fosters a relaxed atmosphere for responding in comfortable ways. In **Reading Instruction for Today** (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1990), Jana Mason and Kathryn Au discuss considerations for teaching reading to dialect-speaking students; these considerations also have value for the read-aloud experience. For example, the authors believe that teachers should (1) realize that speaking a dialect does not significantly interfere with reading comprehension, (2) understand the cultural differences of learners who speak a dialect, (3) maintain a positive attitude concerning the students' language, (4) develop some awareness of nonstandard dialects in general and of students' dialects in particular, and (5) increase learners' familiarity with standard English since it represents the vast majority of text that they will experience. Mason and Au's careful blending of thoughts demonstrates respect and appreciation for students' language while it realistically supports individuals' efforts to become proficient readers. The same perspective complements the read-aloud experience by highlighting the function of meaning, accepting varied forms of responding, and validating the belief that students who speak in nonstandard dialects are **different**, not deficient, in their language use.

• Besides benefiting as listeners, our students also need opportunities to read aloud to an audience. In Joan Feeley, Dorothy Strickland, and Shelley Wepner's **Process Reading and Writing: A Literature-Based Approach** (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), English teacher Al Alio and I coauthored a chapter in which we discussed a storytelling innovation at the Hauppauge (NY) Middle School. Briefly described, we guided sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students to write children's stories and then to tell these stories to preschool and kindergarten children. Although storytelling is more creative and dramatic than is reading aloud, both strategies have comparable benefits for learners; the Hauppauge innovation can therefore be adapted to the goals of reading aloud. Initially, we can immerse learners in published works of children's literature until familiarity is attained with story structure and story language. Beatrix Potter's **The Tale of Peter Rabbit** and Maurice Sendak's **Where the Wild Things Are** represent only two examples of the many published works that are appropriate for reading aloud to young children. When sufficient immersion has occurred, middle school students engage in the writing of their own stories. This activity may take several weeks to complete as the classroom teacher and art teacher provide guidance in writing and in illustrating the stories. Afterward, the students share their stories and practice reading them aloud, focusing on such interactive strategies as using intonational patterns and asking prediction questions. Finally, individuals volunteer to read their stories to the preschoolers or kindergartners.

This innovation can be adapted in a variety of ways to benefit older students and their intended audience.

Reading aloud is vital

Reading aloud is an important motivational strategy not only for primary school children but also for upper-elementary, middle, and high school students. This strategy is used effectively with short selections, with excerpts from lengthy works, and with entire books. It also is useful with a variety of text--narrative, expository, descriptive, and poetic--while it entices our students to read and appreciate content area material and to develop the lifetime reading habit. Not surprisingly, as today's demographic trends cause disruptions in our students' lives and as schools increase their involvement in mainstreaming, inclusion, and detracking, the read-aloud experience can serve as a major complement to our K-12 instructional efforts. Although reading aloud is not a panacea, teachers and administrators must realize its enormous potential for nurturing the literacy development of all students, including a growing number of at-risk learners.

Helpful Hints for Reading Aloud*

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1. Select material that you like and that you think your students will like.

2. Practice reading the selection several times.

3. Wait until your audience is ready, for example, seated and looking at you.

4. Encourage your students to be active listeners by having them use the title and illustrations to make predictions.

5. Pause during the read-aloud so that your listeners can reflect, confirm or disconfirm their initial predictions, and make other predictions.

6. Vary your intonational patterns--pitch, stress, and juncture--as they relate to happiness, sorrow, anger, and other moods in the selection.

7. Use nonverbal behavior, such as grunting, gasping, and frowning, to support the story's intent.

8. Maintain eye contact as much as possible.

9. Ask inferential questions after the read-aloud so that your students have opportunities to apply insights gained from this experience.

10. Use a variety of resources to expand your students' repertoire of narrative, descriptive, expository, and poetic text.

*Adapted from Atwell (1987)